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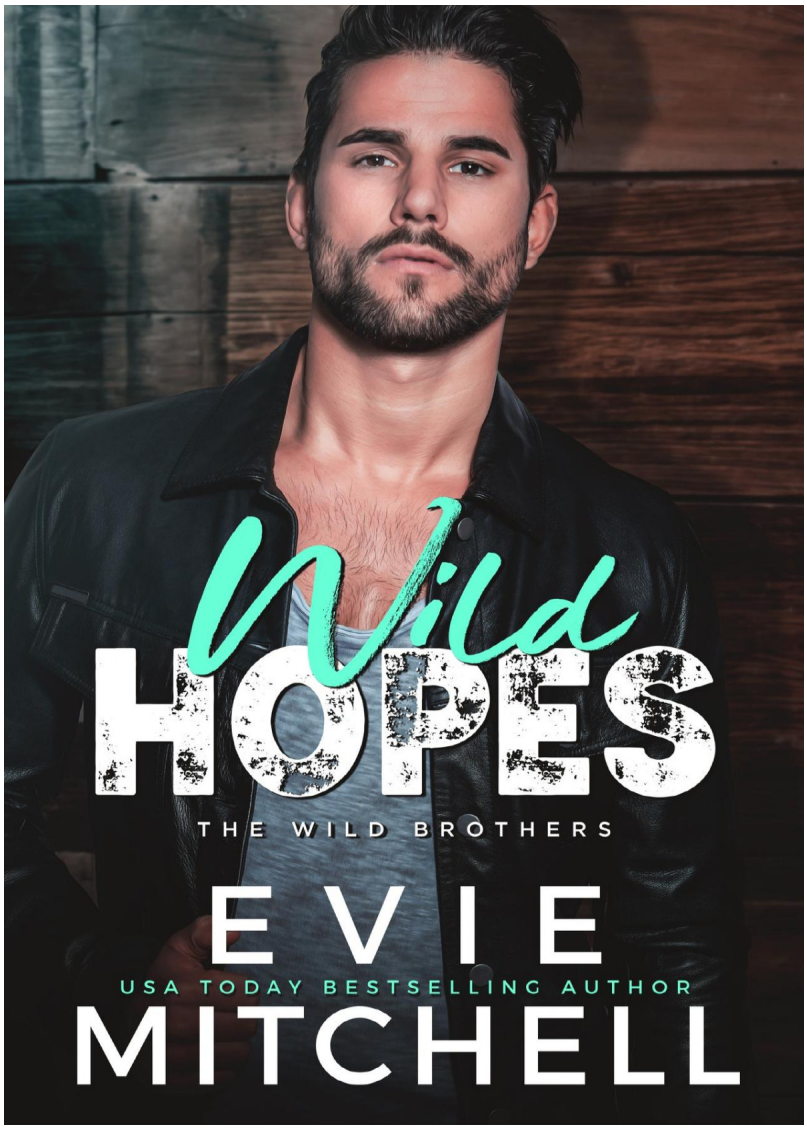

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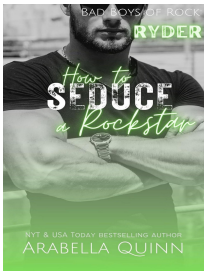

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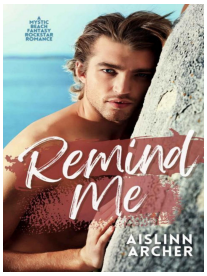

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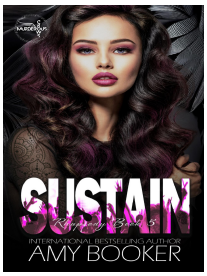

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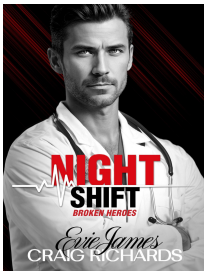

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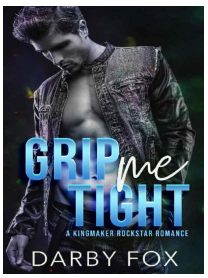

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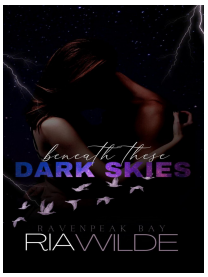

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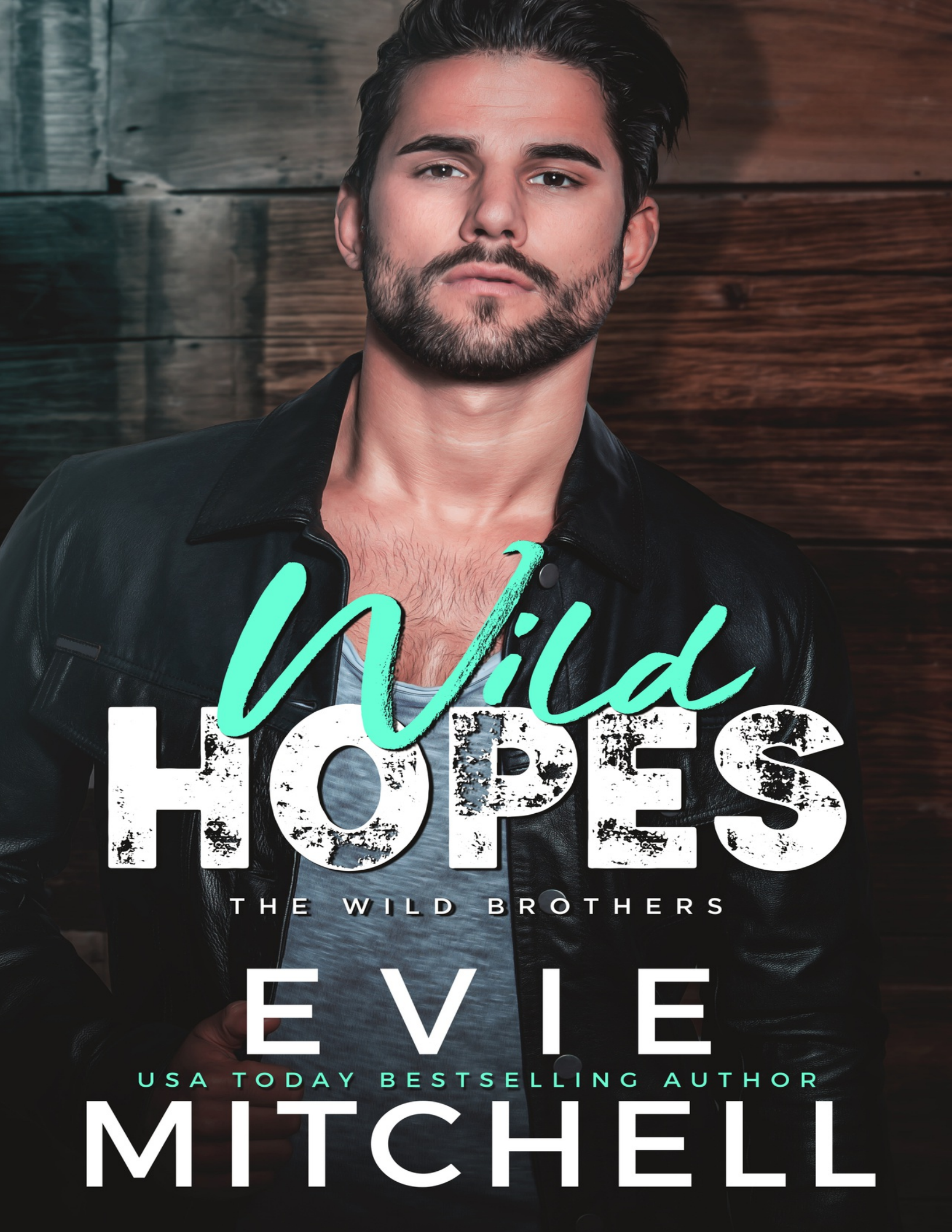
Wild
HOPES
THE WILD BROTHERS
EVIE
USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
MITCHELL

WILD HOPES

THE WILD BROTHERS

EVIE MITCHELL

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The Wild Brothers Series
Books by Evie Mitchell
Connect with Evie Mitchell

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BOOKS BY EVIE MITCHELL

All Access Series

Knot My Type

Love Flushed

Capricorn Cove Series

The Shake-Up

Double the D

Muffin Top

The Mrs. Clause

Beach Party

New Year Knew You

Double Breasted

As You Wish

You Sleigh Me

Resolution Revolution

Meat Load

Larsson Sibling Series

Thunder Thighs

Clean Sweep

The X-List

Reality Check

The Christmas Contract

Dogg Pack

Puppy Love

The Frock Up

Pier Pressure

Bad English

Trick or Trent

Nameless Souls MC Series

Runner

Wrath

Ghost

Shield

Elliot Security Series

Rough Edge

Bleeding Edge

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY

I acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the lands on which I write, the Ngunnawal people, and pay my respect to elders both past and present.

I acknowledge the continued and deep spiritual relationship of the Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' to this land, and their unique cultural and spiritual relationships to the land, waters and seas and their rich contribution to society.

To my greedy readers,
Thank you for bringing my wild hopes to life.

And to my husband, always.

WILD HOPES

The Bad Boy Rocker meets the Mousy Girl Next Door with a STEAMY Secret...

Justice Wild tossed Peach Springs away a decade ago, leaving the town in his dust on his way to rockstar glory. Now, platinum plaques and tabloid headlines precede him, and his bad-boy persona is as electrifying as his guitar riffs. But under the leather and ink, the scars of his past run deep.

Hope Higgins, the girl next door whose apple orchard once stood proudly beside his peach, hides a secret as sweet as her pies. By day, she's a mousy virtual assistant, but by night, she's the bestselling author of a scorching hot rockstar romance series whose main character is suspiciously similar to a certain tattooed singer...

Will Hope be able to keep her secret? Or will a certain tattooed bad boy make all her dreams - including the steamy ones - come true?

Trigger warnings:

Discussion on page of experiencing death of parents.
Discussion of cancer diagnosis in parent and subsequent passing.
Discussion of family trauma and recovery of old relationships.
Discussion of aging grandparent and caring needs.
Discussion of grief and processing.
Experience on page of bullying allegations and public exposure.
Explicit sex scenes and sexting.

PLAYLIST

Ironic by Alanis Morrissette
9 to 5 by Dolly Parton
Hometown Glory by Adele
Free Fallin' by Tom Petty (cover by John Mayer)
Secrets by OneRepublic
Anti-hero by Taylor Swift (cover by Dermot Kennedy)
Unholy by Sam Smith and Kim Petras
Days Like This by Van Morrison (Cover by Dermot Kennedy)
Fast Car by Tracy Chapman
Say You Won't Let Go by James Arthur
Stand by Me by Ben E. King
How Do I Say Goodbye (Acoustic) by Dean Lewis
A Lot More Free by Max McNown
Beautiful Things (Acoustic) by Benson Boone
Texas Hold 'Em by Beyoncé
Stick Season by Noah Khan
Girl Next Door by Justice Wild
Badass Woman by Megan Trainor
Photograph by Ed Sheeran
Lucky by Dermot Kennedy

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PROLOGUE

Hope

Three years earlier

Song: Ironic by Alanis Morissette

In a competition between pussy and beaver, it appeared the less hairy of the two would be triumphant

---

"CAN I PAT YOUR BEAVER?"

I lumbered to turn around, mindful of the fact the tail of my costume could take out half the bar if I spun too quickly.

How did Faye to talk me into this?

"Um," I mumbled, glancing around for my fellow beaver. "I don't think so."

I spotted Faye by the bar, stuck in the three-deep line waiting to order. Her back was to me, and I could see her gestating wildly to another customer her black curls bouncing this way and that as she moved.

Faye! If we have a psychic connection, look at me! Now!

Alas, my best friend continued to chat with the customer dressed as a squirrel.

"Come on," the drunk guy badgered. "It's Halloween. Let me pat your fur."

I ducked my head and turned away, hoping that if I ignored him, he'd leave me alone. Sweat poured down my back, a combination of the dancing, the costume and the man making me nervous.

"Come on. Just one little stroke." He laughed in a way that set the hairs on the back of my neck on edge. An ick feeling slithered down my back to curl in my gut. My pulse pounded in my ears as I tried to shift away only for him match me step for step.

"Could you please back away?" I asked, frustrated that I sounded nervous and breathy. "You're making my uncomfortable."

"Me?" the drunk seemed to be offended by my assertion. "I'm harmless."

And I'm sure that's what Hannibal Lecter said to all him victims too.

Why did men have to ruin everything?

The drunk crowded in, making a lunge for the front of my costume.

I dodged back,. nearly falling over the giant claw feet shoes Faye had insisted we wear.

It'll be funny, she said. A real laugh, she said.

Why did men have to ruin everything?

"Let me pat you!" the drunk lunged at me, and I fell over, tumbling onto my butt in my rush to avoid him.

He reached for me, but a stern voice snapped through the crowd, halting his movement.

"Oi!" the far too familiar voice shouted. "Get your hands off her."

I wanted the earth to swallow me up as the lead singer from the band that had just finished pushed through the crowd toward me.

Like some kind of movie hero, he slipped between me and the drunk, crossing his arms over his chest and planting his feet.

"Back up."

"But I—"

"I said," he growled. "Back the *fuck* up."

The drunk glanced around, wavering as he eyed my rescuer—no doubt wondering if he could take him.

"Fuck it." The aggressor tossed his hands up, flicking me a furious look. "You can have her." He shoved through the crowd,

disappearing into the crush.

My hero huffed. “Alright, folks. Nothing to see here.”

The people with their phones turned away, returning to their conversations.

Mortified, I tried to push up from the floor only to find myself stuck. The tail made the costume butt-heavy, dragging me off-centre as I tried and failed to stand.

“Here.” Hands slipped under my arms, hauling me up.

And just like that I found myself in the arms of the very last person I ever thought I’d see. Faye, her brother, Trent—who was our designated driver for the evening—and I, had arrived late to the bar, and had spent most of the evening dancing at the back of the crowded room to avoid hitting people with our tails. I’d thought the singer had sounded familiar, but without hearing his name, or seeing his face I’d been left with an impression of familiarity rather than this slap in the face.

What were the chances that Justice Wild, my high school crush and main character in all of my hottest fantasies would be performing tonight, a half a world away from Peach Springs, the small town where we’d both grown up?

My gaze travelled hungrily over him, absorbing all the changes that the last ten years had imprinted on him.

Justice had always been a good-looking kid, and unsurprisingly he’d matured into a gorgeous man. His dark brown, nearly black, hair complement his tanned skin and green eyes. He’d grown taller since I last saw him, and based on my own short stature, I’d have pegged him as standing at an inch or so under six feet.

While his height might have changed, his enigmatic presence hadn’t. His bright green eyes and his muscular body practically vibrated with barely leashed energy. Tattoos ran up and down his arms, images that had been crafted in the years since we’d last met and which meant something to him but would remain a mystery to me.

He still looked good enough to lick.

Double damn.

One would have assumed my brothers, who were still friends with him, would have mentioned it. But then no one knew about my silent obsession – and I planned to keep it that way.

“Hope?” Justice blinked, a slow smile curving his lips. “Shit. I didn’t know you were coming tonight.”

My mouth opened and closed but words failed to appear. He glanced over my shoulder.

“Are your brother’s here? I sent them a text but didn’t hear anything.”

I shook my head. “It’s picking season. They’re trying to get the last fruit in before it gets too cold.”

His lips twisted into a wry smile. “I should have known. What are they growing these days?”

My own curved into an answering smile. “Apples, of course. But they do have a peach orchard—just a small one.”

Peach Springs, the small town where we’d both grown up, was world renowned for its peaches…. And yet my family had decided to grow apples.

These days my siblings and I lived in Capricorn Cove, a small town in the Isle of Astipia, known for its beautiful coastline and delicious fresh produce. My mother’s family lived here and she’d returned towing us kids with her after… after…

I pushed away the thought, focussing on Justice. “It’s good to see you.”

He grinned. “And you. Come backstage, we can catch up. You can fill me in on what’s happening in your world.”

I hesitated. “My friend Faye is getting us drinks. I wouldn’t want her to worry.”

“Which one is she?”

I pointed at my fellow beaver and Justice barked out a laugh. “I should have known. Hey, Sam!”

Sam, the lead guitarist, glanced up from where he stood on the stage, packing up their cords and instruments. “Can you keep an eye on Faye. Did I get her name right?”

I nodded.

“Can you let Faye—the other beaver—know I’m taking Hope backstage? We’re both from Peach Springs.”

Sam glanced my way, one eyebrow cocking. “You’re Faye XX’s housemate, right?”

I nodded. “And you’re Sam Dogg. You live down the road.”

He chuckled. “Yeah. Sorry about the noise. We try to keep it to a dull roar.”

I shrugged then realized he’d never be able to see it under the heavy beaver suit. “It’s not a problem. I like your stuff.”

He glanced over my head at Faye, narrowing his gaze. “That’s her brother, right?”

I glanced back to see she’d made it back to the table that Trent had secured and was currently gesturing wildly at him. “Yeah, that’s him.”

“Cool. I’ll let her know where you’ve gone. No problem.”

“Appreciate it,” Justice said, catching my hand and giving me a small tug. I gave him, stumbling behind him in my oversized shoes.

Seriously, why couldn’t he have seen me last year? Last Halloween I dressed as Marilyn Monroe and three guys gave me their numbers.

He led me down a dark corridor behind the stage and into a small room crowded with people—all of whom stopped talking when their sexy lead singer walked in with a beaver.

God, kill me now. Please.

Justice handed me a beer and introduced me to his band and crew, whose names I promptly forgot.

"Shots?" one of the roadies asked, holding up a bottle of some clear liquid.

Justice shook his head but nodded at me. "Hope might."

I took the offered glass and downed it quickly, praying it would offer some courage—or at least dull my embarrassment.

A second shot glass replaced the first, and then a third appeared. When a fourth slipped into my hand, Justice intervened.

"How about we sit and chat for a while first?" he asked gently.

I nodded, allowing him to place a hand on my back and gently guide me toward a padded stool that accommodated my costume.

He took the seat next to mine, a faded armchair.

"Tell me how your family is," he encouraged.

I flapped a beaver paw, feeling a little off centre as the alcohol hit my system. "They're surviving. Capricorn Cove has been good to us. Harley, Holden and Hudson are busy with the farm."

"And Lace?" he asked, referring to my sister-in-law.

"She and Boone are great." I chuckled just thinking about my nephew. "He's growing into a temperamental teenager." My smile dipped. "But I don't know if Lace and Harley are going to last. They've had issues for a while."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

I shook my head, forcing a smile. "How about you? Tell me all about your family."

Justice blew out a breath. "I… I text them occasionally. Fletch, Beau and Asher are all still in Peach Springs. Colt got out and became a stunt man like he wanted. I see him occasionally when in LA. As for Owen…." He trailed off. "Let's just say that overall, I'm not exactly close to them anymore."

"You're estranged?"

He lifted one shoulder in a half shrug. "I don't know what we are."

I placed a furry hand on his knee. "You should fix that. Family is important—and I while I'm supportive of separating from family if they're not the right people for you, I have a feeling that's not what's happening here."

He chuckled dryly. "You always know how to get to the heart of an issue."

I removed my hand reluctantly. "You should try to repair what's there. Life is too short to let wounds fester."

"I wouldn't even know where to start."

"A text to check in might be good."

He nodded thoughtfully. "I'll think on it." He shifted, changing the subject. "Alright, on to more important things. Tell me about you. What are you up to these days?"

"Studying, work, that's my whole life."

He chuckled. "What? No boyfriend?"

I snorted. "No. The dating pool in this town is abysmally small. And any of the guys who might be a good match from college are either wanting to move back to the cities, or run in the other direction when commitment is on the table."

I was vaguely aware that the alcohol had begun to hit me, that my hand gestures were becoming larger, and my words a little slurred.

But then, maybe it wasn't the alcohol so much as being in Justice's presence—he had such an enigmatic personality, that when he turned his full attention on you, it felt a little like floating.

A woman tripped and fell against the arm of his chair, laughing as she slid down it to land in his lap.

"Sorry!" she chuckled, her voice low and sexy. "I didn't mean to interrupt."

Justice's arms automatically slid around her to steady her, keeping the woman from falling.

"Not a problem. Jacie, meet Hope."

"Hey," she said brightly. Nice to meet you."

I wasn't exactly sure which animal she was meant to be dressed as, but I made an educated guess based on the ears and whiskers that it was a cat.

A pussy cat, if you will.

And in a competition between pussy and beaver, it appeared the less hairy of the two would be triumphant.

My heart flopped sadly, an ache taking up residence in the middle of my chest as Justice allowed her to settle in his lap, leaning back against him as we chatted.

Justice wasn't for me. He never had been, and he never would be. I just needed to reconcile that my childish dreams of marrying the boy next door would never eventuate.

Thank god he'd never guessed my feelings. And, if I had it my way, he never would.

The roadie came back around and offered me another shot. I took it before Justice could stop me, needing the hit of fire to seer away the tears burning in my throat.

"Hope."

I glanced toward the door to the room and found Trent, and some other guy standing in the doorway. “You’re okay,” he said, his relief palatable.

Not even close.

I tilted my head to the side, offering him a blank smile. “Of course I am. Why wouldn’t I be?” I lied.

“Because you’re drunk, honey.” Justice tugged gently on one of my pigtails “Sounds like these nice guys are your ride home.”

Don’t cry, don’t cry, don’t cry.

I wanted to show him I could party with his crew. That I was better than the beaver costume and pigtails.

But you’re not, are you? You’re a small-town girl and he’s destined for stardom. The two aren’t compatible.

“But I want to—” I began.

“Time to go,” Justice ordered, not brooking any protests. He shifted Jacie off his lap and stood, hauling me up once again.

“It was great seeing you, Hope,” he murmured, pressing a small kiss to her forehead. “And I’ll think on what you said.”

An embarrassed flush crept up my neck. Once again, I wasn’t anything to him.

“Off you go,” Justice gave me a little shove in Trent’s direction. “We’ll catch up another time.”

Dismissed, I ducked my head and waddled out of the room, biting the inside of my cheek hard enough to draw blood, but goddamn it I refused to cry in front of anyone.

It was only later, in the silence of my bedroom that I allowed the tears to come.

Next time, I promised myself. *Next time he’ll see me as a woman.*

1

HOPE

Song: 9 to 5 by Dolly Parton

Give me three reasons as to why I shouldn't kill the idiots I work with.

I STARED at the picture of Justice Wild hanging above my desk, mentally cataloguing the ways in which he embodied the perfect bad-boy rocker vibe.

Cocky grin — check.

Tattoos — check.

Wild hair — check.

Women screaming his name — check.

Excellent music — triple check.

Once upon a time he'd lived next door. The moody but charismatic kid who'd channelled his love of music into a billion-dollar career.

Meanwhile, here I was living in my grandmother's house, dealing with difficult employees and working for a boss that didn't seem to understand why I was stressed.

"We've never had this conversation."

I blinked, as I came back to reality with a rough thud.

Taking a deep breath, I unmuted myself.

"Kiara, I don't think this is a productive meeting. You're saying we've never had this conversation before, I'm saying I've provided you with feedback both directly and through others in the team. I think—"

"The only feedback you've ever provided to me was when you called my work shabby. Then I sat at my desk and cried for an hour."

I stared at the woman on the other side of the screen, desperately fighting for calm.

Kiara had the potential to be an amazing employee. The issue was that she assumed she didn't need to change anything.

"I don't believe I've called your work shabby."

"You did!" Her voice caught and her eyes welled with tears. "You're a horrible boss! How can you say you didn't?"

I muted myself and stared at the screen, biting the inside of my cheek to keep from crying. Kiara's rant began once again, her face flushing as tears ran unchecked down her cheeks.

I hated this conversation. I hated how after every catch up I felt drained and useless. I hated how this had been going on for months and despite my best efforts we seemed to be stuck in the same cycle.

I'd provide her with feedback. She'd deny I ever provided her with the feedback. I'd show her emails and notes from our meetings, and she would deny we ever had that conversation.

It had gotten to the point where I'd begun to doubt my own sanity. I'd begun to look over my notes and wonder if they were lies – figments of my imagination.

They weren't but that was how I was beginning to feel.

An hour later the conversation ended with agreement for yet another discussion.

I ended the call and tossed off my headset, pinching the bridge of my nose to keep from crying.

"Damn it," I muttered, rolling my shoulders as if trying to shrug off the energy of the discussion we'd just had. "I don't want to do this anymore."

Once upon a time I'd loved my job. We worked with businesses of all kinds creating custom solutions for their organizations. Be it social media posts, meeting minutes, developing project plans, or supporting staff recruitment. The work was varied and interesting, the hours were great, the pay was excellent, and I had managed a great team of twelve staff who all loved their jobs.

Or at least I had, until six months ago. Kiara had been hired and within a month my job satisfaction had deteriorated. She'd struggled to juggle clients, had refused to communicate with me what she needed, and had begun to assign her work to other team members instead of actioning herself.

I wanted to help her. I wanted her to succeed. But every effort was met with hostility and wild accusations. And my boss, George, while a good guy, didn't seem to appreciate how stressful and toxic the situation had become.

I finished up a few emails then logged off for the day as my phone beeped with an incoming text.

FAYE

Give me three reasons as to why I shouldn't kill the idiots I work with.

I grinned, leaning back in my chair as my fingers flew across the screen.

HOPE

1. You need the money. 2. You'd look horrendous in a prison outfit. 3. You're married to one of those 'idiots'.

FAYE

You're right. I'll add itching powder to their underwear before a gig. That'll teach 'em.

HOPE

What's happened now?

FAYE

The usual. I'm wrangling PR nightmares, Justice has gone AWOL, Felix is brooding over some couple he met on a mountain treat, Radley is being… Radley, and do NOT get me started on the sex animal I married. The man is insatiable!

HOPE

And that's a bad thing?

FAYE

It is when I'm in the middle of a call with Rolling Stone about getting them on the cover and Sam decides to crawl under my desk and eat me out.

I squealed a little, delighted my best friend in the world had landed such a good man.

We'd met in college, Faye with her bold personality and sharp wit had taken me under her wing. We'd become fast friends, and quickly moved in together. We'd lived off campus in a quiet bungalow where I'd managed to kill every plant and blade of grass, and she'd managed to set fire to the cooktop three times.

After the third visit by her brother, who was a firefighter, we'd agreed that I'd take over the cooking and she could do the gardens.

I'd loved those long, busy days spent laughing over some new story or calamity. We'd been poor but happy.

Then Faye had graduated and been offered a job by The Wild Ones. Did I find it strange that Justice had employed my best friend as his PR rep? A little. But Faye had known her husband, Sam, for years before the band had formed, and Sam had suggested her when the band had needed someone passionate but cheap.

The thing I'd taken away from the whole situation is that the world is a small place.

I returned Faye's text.

HOPE

And what is the problem?

FAYE

No, you're right. Muting your phone so you can climax is totally professional. Thank you for the reality check.

HOPE

This is going in a book.

FAYE

I should hope so. Speaking off… have you seen Justice yet?

HOPE

No. Should I be expecting to?

FAYE

Maybe? He asked Simon to organize a suit for one of his brothers. Something about an event coming up. Do you know anything about that?

HOPE

You should ask him.

FAYE

I have. And the fact you're being cryptic tells me I should push harder before the media find out what's up. Thanks for nothing you goose.

I chuckled.

HOPE

Love you too. See you in a few weeks?

FAYE

You know it!

I clicked on the after-work mode on my phone, breathing a little sigh. I missed Faye and couldn't wait to see her at my birthday, but there was a grief attached to seeing her moving forward with her life. A yearning I'd never expected had begun to take root in my chest—a wish for the kind of things she had.

I wanted her to be happy and fulfilled more than I wanted my next breath. My heart held such joy for her—she deserved every good thing. But watching her find her dream job, travel the world, embrace herself, and find a relationship with a person who adored and complemented her in every way, made me want the same.

I'm lonely.

I didn't have any problem with being single—in fact most of my life I'd preferred it. But lately my world had narrowed to become one video call, text or email after another. My friends were moving on with their lives while I felt… stuck.

I loved my Gran, but she had become the only person I physically interacted with. I longed for connection, meaning, touch. I knew I needed to crack the shell I'd built around my life, but I'd become trapped, like a wallflower or bluestocking that had a badge placed upon her before she'd even fully matured.

"Get over yourself." I forced away my morose thoughts and opened my personal laptop. "Your life is fine."

Flexing my fingers as my manuscript loaded, I glanced up at the picture of Justice hanging above my desk.

"Let's see what mischief you're getting up to tonight."

By day I was Hope Higgins, the shy virtual assistant who lived with her grandmother and made pies for the town charity events.

But by night I was H. Stone, author of the bestselling series, 'Savage'. The series followed the sexual exploits of the Savage Boys, a band that had taken the world by storm. The books featured each of the band members as they fell in love and found their soul mate.

It was the worst kept secret that Justin Savage, my lead character, was inspired in no small part by Justice Wild.

Did I have a crush?

Oh yeah.

But I'd been nursing that sucker since I was 4 years old, and Justice had agreed to push me on a swing.

Would my dream of being the woman he came home to each night ever come true?

Absolutely not.

Would my dream of some epic love filled with steamy sex and deliciously delightful public declarations of love ever come true?

Again, no.

Once could say I wasn't exactly the kind of woman who inspired feelings of love and devotion in others. I'd once been referred to as a wallflower by a well-meaning but horrendously insensitive aunt.

My books had become an outlet for my unfulfilled desires. Every night I wrote about all the things I wished would happen in my life knowing none of it was even remotely close to reality. For brief periods I could be someone else—someone bold and confident. Someone who inspired love and lust and devotion.

Someone who wasn't lonely.

"Hope, dinner's ready."

I hit save and sat back in my chair, stretching my arms and cracking my back.

My family had no idea I wrote smutty romance, and I intended to keep it that way.

I headed downstairs, pausing when I saw my grandmother sitting outside on the back deck.

"Gran?"

She waved at me through the porch door. "Come sit with me, dear. I have news."

'News' always translated to gossip—and as the oldest member of our small town of Peach Springs, Gran always seemed to know everything about everyone.

I served myself up a plate of chicken and salad and settled beside her on the porch swing.

"Mr. Allen from Peach Fuzz called today," Gran said, referring to the owner of the local barber shop.

"Mm?" I murmured as I chewed. My attention had begun to drift back to the story that awaited me upstairs.

Maybe I could have Justin meet his potential match at a—

"Justice Wild is back in town."

My attention diverted so quickly I was surprised I didn't end up with whip lash.

"What?"

Gran nodded, spearing a cherry tomato with her fork. "The boy is back in town. Went to the Fuzz for a haircut. Tipped Mr. Allen good, too. Must be here for the dedication."

I swallowed then swallowed again, fighting against the rolling emotions that had spontaneously erupted in my gut.

"Dedication?"

"The court case was finally settled. The developer lost. The park is safe. It'll be handed over the town officially in a few weeks. Didn't you read the paper?"

I shook my head slowly, trying to piece together my thoughts.

Twenty years ago, Justice's parents had been working to donate a large tract of their land to the town. They'd been peach farmers – and while the rest of their land had been perfect for agricultural use, that area was far too rocky and hilly for them to utilize.

They'd decided to donate it as a nature reserve to the town for everyone to use. Only they'd passed away before finalizing the donation, and a developer had lodged an appeal with the town to try and get the area rezoned for housing.

"I must have missed the news."

"Well, you've been on that computer for weeks. Barely leaving the house, working around the clock." Gran tsked under her breath. "You're letting your life roll by without participating in it."

I brushed away her concerns. "Why is Justice in town? I thought he was on his tour."

Gran waved her hand dismissively. "The tour is on break for two months before the next leg. Word has it he caught some kind of cold." She sniffed. "Gladys is sure it's mono."

"And he's spending it here? In town?"

Gran nodded.

I swallowed, glancing away as I stared out at the apple trees that surrounded our small cottage.

Unlike the rest of the town, which was peach obsessed, my great-great-great-great grandparents had decided to plant apples.

Apples had been my family's obsession until my father had passed away when I was thirteen. My mother had tried to continue the tradition and run the orchard, but her heart hadn't been in it. A few years later she'd moved us half-way across the world back to her home country of Astipia.

My father's side of the family still ran the orchard, which was well known for its fresh, crisp varieties of heirloom, organic fruit.

That was why I was here. My Gran—my father's mother—needed help around the house while she waited for a spot to open at the local assisted living home. But with peak fruit picking season nearly upon us, there wasn't anyone in the family who could assist her.

And so I'd upended my life, moved halfway around the world and returned to Peach Springs to help.

The adjustment hadn't been easy. Being an apple in a town full of peaches had its downsides. Not to mention possessing the only black thumb in the family. I couldn't even keep a succulent alive, let alone an apple tree. Thankfully no one seemed to expect me to pitch in on the farming side.

"I want you to take that pie you baked this morning over to the Wild house."

My head twisted to stare at my tiny, wrinkled grandmother. Her dark black hair had faded to a striking white. We shared the same blue eyes, though hers were a much deeper blue than my own. Unlike shy me with my average height, abundant hips and overly generous breasts, her small frame and petite body belied her larger-than-life personality. She had ruled her home with an iron fist—and all her children still bowed to her whims.

I aspired to be my Gran when I grew up.

"But that was for our dessert."

Gran pegged me with a glare that said southern hospitality was alive and damn near considered sacred by her.

"You make sure you take the cream I just made too," she said, ignoring my protest.

"Yes, Ma'am." I bowed my head, pushing absently at the salad on my plate.

"You're a good girl, Hope." Gran pat my leg. "Now go put on a nice dress. You never know, maybe one of those Wild boys will take a liking to you."

I snorted.

She tsked gently once again. "Stranger things have happened."

Yeah, right.

2

JUSTICE

Song: Hometown Glory by Adele

The return of the prodigal son was less than enthusiastic

I LEANED against my rented truck and stared up at the old farmhouse, fighting to catalogue the complexity of emotions that rolled through me.

Damn, not much has changed.

And yet everything had.

Or maybe not everything so much as me.

"Fuck," I muttered, running a hand through my freshly cut hair. "That's far too deep for this time of the evening."

I'd delayed the inevitable family reunion for as long as possible by working my way from one side of town to the other. I didn't mind spending money in the small businesses that lined Main Street, but at some point, the businesses had ended and I'd been forced to face reality.

Fuck.

I moved to push off the truck but movement from across the yard caught my attention. I squinted into the setting light, struck by the flame-colored locks, highlighted by the fading sun, and a round dish in one hand. Whoever she was, the woman had the body of Venus—and those legs?

I needed them wrapped around me.

"Justice?"

My filthy thoughts screeched to a halt.

I raised my arm to squint into the light.

"Hope?"

She nodded, stepping into the shadow of the house. "I thought that was you."

My brain struggled to reconcile the woman before me with the feelings of almost sisterly love I had for her.

"Hope Higgins. I haven't seen you since…." I trailed off as a grin tugged at my lips.

She waved one hand dismissively. "We don't have to talk about that."

The last time I'd seen her had been in some dive bar in a little coastal town where my lead guitarist, Sam, hailed from. It'd been Halloween, and while most women had been dressed to kill, Hope had chosen a beaver costume—a big brown thing with giant feet, fake claws, and a thick tail. She'd made me laugh that night—and damn had I needed the distraction. But then she always had been able to make me smile.

I sobered, remembering the fucker that had attempted to accost her that night. The fucker had deserved more than a warning—but I'd promised to be on my best behavior and had fought off the urge to lay him out.

I crossed my arms and tucked one leg over the other as I leaned against my truck. "I don't know about that, darlin'," I drawled slowly, enjoying watching her squirm. "It's not every day a woman shows me her beaver."

Even in the dim evening light I could see the red flush creeping from under her primly buttoned top, and I found myself strangely intrigued by the idea of unbuttoning her top just to see how far that blush slipped down her skin.

I shook off the thought. Hope Higgins had always been the good girl next door. Quiet, dutiful, and shy. All through school she'd volunteered for all the shit that people should care about but rarely do—like raising money to save the whales or encouraging people to recycle.

I eyed her, quietly pleased to see she still wore button-up cardigans, though her auburn hair remained in a braid that looked far too tight for a woman whose face deserved to be on the cover of magazines. Because Hope Higgins, despite her best efforts to downplay her charms, was a bombshell.

If she'd been anyone else, I might have been tempted to do more than tease her. But this was Hope—the good girl next door. As I'd been told more times than I could count, good girls deserved great guys and I wasn't anywhere close to being a good guy.

Mentally, I chastised my dick for wanting her.

We're not even close to being in her league.

"It was a costume." Hope's chin jutted out stubbornly. "A lot of people dress as beavers for Halloween."

"Name one."

"Faye."

I shook my head. "Doesn't count. Faye is a maniac."

"Hey! She's my best friend."

I grinned. "I won't hold that against you."

Her gaze narrowed, amusement dancing in their glorious depths. "You're one to talk. Didn't some woman burn your clothes the other week?"

I winced. "I will neither confirm nor deny."

"Hmm, hedging your bets."

"What can I say, I'm a gambler." I eyed the pie in her hands. "Speaking off, if I was a betting man, I'd assume that might be for me."

"Don't count on it." She held the pie away. "This is for Asher."

"Bullshit. Why'd you bring that grump a treat?"

"Your brother is a good guy. Last week he held Gran to our car after she got tired in the grocery store."

"He's a saint. I'll be sure to nominate him for a medal."

She snorted, juggling the pie pan from one hand to the other. "You're a smartass, you know that, right?"

I chuckled, appreciating her sass. The Hope I'd known from years past had been shy and reserved, sweet with a cracking sense of humor. This Hope had all the same traits—but with a confidence and maturity that I found sexy as hell.

Not in her league, remember?

"Justice? That you?"

I stiffened, dread settling like a stone in my stomach. "Hello, Asher."

The light from the porch bathed my brother in a soft glow. He'd aged since I'd last been home, his brown hair now holding some salt near his temples. His skin would always be tanned—it was the kind of bone deep color that came from decades of farming under the warm Georgia sun.

He looked so much like our dad it hurt to see him.

"The prodigal son returns," Asher said, his tone dry.

It appeared that unlike the rest of the town, my reception at home would be less than enthusiastic.

But then what did I expect? I hadn't exactly left under the most auspicious of circumstances.

In fact, if memory served me right, I might have told everyone in my family to make enthusiastic love to themselves as I tossed my gear in my truck and driven off in a fit of egotistical rage.

It had worked out. Being alone had forced me to grow up. I'd worked my ass off to prove my brother's wrong about pursuing a career in music.

Now here I stood, an international rockstar with more money than a man could spend in a lifetime, owning five properties and numerous awards, and adored by fans the world over.

And somehow driving through the gates of the farm had transported me back to the exact maturity level of that angry 20-year-old.

My jaw tightened, my hands curling into fists as we stared each other down.

Hope thrust the pie dish into my hands as she shifted between us, grinning widely at Asher.

"Gran sent me," she said, walking away from me and up to the porch. "Said I should bring over a pie since you'll soon have a full house on your hands."

My gaze dropped to her ass before snapping back up.

She's like a little sister. Jesus, man, get your shit together.

Asher softened, greeting Hope with the same warmth that she seemed to bring out in everyone she met.

I didn't know how but within a few sentences she'd broken the ice between me and my brother, smoothing over our rough edges.

She bustled inside the old farmhouse, acting for all the world like she owned it.

"Is Madilyn in?" she asked as she walked down the hall, Asher and I trailing her like lost ducklings.

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Exploring the Variety of Random Documents with Different Content

the stream, and take him on the road? That, too, were risky. Perchance 'twere wiser to watch him into the house, and there trap him. Yes, by Jupiter!" he muttered excitedly, "trap him and trap them all. Two traitors are better than one, and if she be not judged traitor for thus harbouring rebels, may I dance to Kirke's music myself. Why, 'tis no less than Mistress Lisle lost her head for last week. Yes, it must be so. Ah! the pretty fool, wi' her prince of plots. She may plot, ay, and counter-plot, but she'll not out-plot Jonathan Crutch, I warrant me. But soft, who comes here?"

It was Peter Drew, the smith, from the village, who strode through the coppice on his way to the Manor House. He greeted the Corporal with a scowl.

"Good-day, fellow," began that worthy. "What do you up here?"

"My lawful business, which is more than you can say," growled the smith, and passed on towards the house.

"Hum! So yonder is her messenger," mused the corporal. "Well, let him pass, he'll lime our bird for us."

Then he arose, and cautiously resuming his post of observation within the laurel bush he tossed the note back into the garden. Scarcely had he done so when Barbara came down the garden, searching eagerly for the missing paper. Presently she espied it where it lay on the lawn, and picking it up she placed it carefully in her pocket and returned to the house, while the corporal chuckled again over his success.

Ten minutes later Peter Drew came into sight round a corner of the building. He led a sturdy pony by the bridle, and his right arm was firmly linked in the arm of the unfortunate hawker, who was helpless in the grip of the powerful smith, and with rage in his heart

was forced to walk along apparently on terms of the greatest friendship with his companion. For behind them marched the wolfhound, and the hawker knew that at the least attempt to escape he would be given over at once to the mercy of this relentless foe. They turned in the direction of the smithy and soon disappeared from sight. Then all was quiet once more and the corporal, again extricating himself from the sheltering laurel, set off for the village to collect his men and make his dispositions for the evening.

He proceeded with the utmost caution. Two of his men he posted on the main road to Cannington, where a path turned off over the hill to the river, and two more some distance up the stream, that they might watch and follow Sir Rupert should he by chance elect not to visit the Manor House itself. These he instructed not to interfere with Sir Rupert, unless he showed signs of scenting a trap, but to allow him to reach his house unmolested. The remainder he ordered to conceal themselves in the plantation near the house, and after dusk at a signal from him quietly to surround the building. He enjoined on all the greatest caution in concealing themselves, and bade them take good note of all who entered or left the mansion, but not to prevent any or show themselves until he gave the signal.

This done he returned to the Winslow Arms and proceeded to fortify his spirits and strengthen his wits by a hearty meal, thanking his stars the while that Captain Protheroe's absence gave him the opportunity to direct the operations in his own way.

"If the matter were but left to the captain, there would be but little fear for Sir Rupert; he hath neither wit nor stomach for such a job. Like as not he would have left the women alone, to harbour what rebels they choose. I marvel how he hath already risen so high

in favour, save that the general is always easy tempered. If the business had been in my hands alone, the fellow had been laid by the heels long since."

So mused the worthy corporal, as he devoured his dinner and complacently reviewed his crafty proceedings of the morning.

His meal and his meditations were alike presently cut short by the entrance of the host, who announced that a man stood without clamouring for instant permission to speak with the captain, or if that might not be, with the corporal of the troop.

"'Tis a most persistent fellow. He saith he hath information of great moment for your honour, but I'll not vouch for the truth of it; he is a pedlar by trade, and such have ever glib tongues," continued the host with some scorn.

The corporal started on hearing the man's message; but remembering that a part of Mistress Barbara's plan was to send a messenger to the captain he smiled cunningly and ordered that the pedlar be instantly admitted.

"'Tis some traitorous rogue she hath employed, I doubt not," he muttered, "and a daring fellow withal to venture thus into the net. 'Twere well that such an one be speedily laid by the heels."

Then the door opened and in hurried Simon, the Pedlar.

Breathless and eager, and glancing nervously over his shoulder the while, he ignored the curt greeting of the corporal and broke at once roughly into his story.

"'Tis concerning Sir Rupert Winslow," he began. "I have certain information to sell. I know where he lies hid and likewise whither he purposes to ride this very night. An it be not so, you may hang me

for a lying rogue. Give me my price and I will deliver him over to you within three hours. But first I must see my reward."

Had the hawker's mind been in a less agitated condition, had he been less nervous of pursuit and interruption he had assuredly gone about his business in a more cautious manner; but so fearful was he lest even at the eleventh hour he might be prevented from driving his bargain that he failed entirely to note the effect of his words upon the corporal.

As for that self-complacent mortal, ever since the unceremonious entrance of the pedlar whom he instantly recognized as the smith's companion of that morning, his indignation had increased, until at the final rough demand for money, it overflowed in a furious burst of anger. Even had he believed the man honest, it is doubtful whether he would have listened long to one so utterly wanting in all the obsequious attentions which he considered due to his dignity, but convinced as he was that the fellow was no more than an impudent impostor, his rage knew no bounds.

Springing from his chair, and banging furiously with his fist upon the table he roared at the astonished pedlar, pouring forth upon him such a torrent of abuse and threats that Simon was terrified. In vain did the unfortunate pedlar attempt to remonstrate, in vain did he plead that his tale might be put to the proof, the corporal would hear no more, and before he could grasp the reason of this unexpected anger he found himself marched away between two troopers and securely locked into an upper chamber of the inn, where he was left to meditate in solitude upon his second unsuccessful attempt at bargain driving, and to curse the ill fate that had led him so to over-reach himself.

Then, with a pleasing sense of duty done and villainy outwitted, the corporal soothed his ruffled feelings with a cooling draught of cider, finished his dinner in peace, and departed once more to take up a position behind his well-tried laurel bush, whence he could survey at once the stream, the lawn, and the entrance to the house itself.

Ten minutes after his departure an anonymous note was left at the Inn for Captain Protheroe. The note lay unheeded on the table, but Barbara's mission had already been unwittingly fulfilled by the very man who sought to betray her.

CHAPTER VI

Time passed slowly for the corporal as he crouched wearily at his post.

The garden remained deserted. Late in the afternoon three maid-servants chattering gaily, he supposed at the prospect of an evening holiday, came out and set off for the village, calling back saucy messages to Phoebe Marlow, who, from the doorway disconsolately watched them depart. Then again all was silent.

The bright promise of the early morning hours was not fulfilled. The evening sky was heavy with clouds and dusk fell early. The corporal had changed his position a hundred times, had yawned and sighed, and even nodded once or twice before the longed-for hour arrived.

But at length, about ten o'clock, a light twinkled in one of the windows of the dark and silent house, and presently the soft swish of a paddle up the stream was audible.

The corporal held his breath and craned forward, looking and listening eagerly. He heard the dull thud of the boat against the bank, a paddle drop, soft footfalls on the lawn, and presently the dark figure of a man loomed into sight, and passed quickly toward the house.

But ere he reached the building, the door was flung wide and a woman appeared on the lintel with outstretched arms, crying loud, "Rupert! At last! At last!"

For an instant the figures stood revealed in the glare of light from the doorway, and the corporal noted a tall, slender youth with bright complexion and dark, curling hair, falling in love-locks to his shoulders, as Barbara had described him, herself in form and feature. Taking the woman into his arms, they passed into the house together, and the door was closed.

For a few moments the corporal waited cautiously, then as all remained quiet, he crept from his hiding-place and, cracking his fingers with delight at the success of his enterprise, gave the signal for his men to surround the house.

In five minutes they were posted to his satisfaction, so carefully that not a cat could escape unobserved, and having ordered them to let any enter who would (for he had as lief catch a dozen rebels as one), but to allow none to leave the building without his express command, he approached the entrance and delivered a thundering blow upon the door.

There was no answer. The echoes died away in the distance and the house remained silent as night.

He raised his arm for a second blow, when a light touch on the shoulder caused him to spring round in astonishment and fear, for his heart was already in his mouth with excitement and self-importance.

Behind him stood Captain Protheroe, regarding him grimly.

"How now, corporal?" demanded the captain sharply, "What is the meaning of this? I came riding down the lane when I find three troopers crouching by the gate yonder, for all the world like conies in their burrow, and I learn, forsooth, that you have surrounded this house and were even about to force an entrance. What warrant have you for this, and why was I not informed sooner of the matter? Must I again teach you, sirrah, that you take too much upon yourself?"

The corporal regarded him sulkily.

"There is a traitor within, captain," he muttered.

"Bah! another of your mare's nests, I make no doubt. What proof have you?"

"Proof enough and to spare," answered the corporal stoutly. "Witness my own eyes and ears," and he rapidly reported all that had passed. The captain's face hardened as he listened and he glanced sharply up at the house.

"Ah! it seems you are on the right track for once. But zounds, fool," he continued angrily, "why, in Heaven's name, didn't you trap him before he entered the house and leave the women-folk in peace? I warrant we'll have a bad business now. Dolt! Well, there is

no other way now. Knock again and on with the work. 'Twill be a wretched business," he muttered with a shrug and a wry smile.

The corporal again knocked loudly, and after a considerable interval, footsteps were heard inside, and a voice demanded timidly who was there.

"Open at once, i' the King's name," roared the corporal.

"Marry, then, which king?" answered the voice, "there be so many kings nowadays."

"Open in the name of King James," was the angry answer.

"Now wherefore King James? King Monmouth was far better favoured," answered the voice.

"Zounds, fellow!" interrupted the captain angrily, "wouldest parley all day?" Then dealing a furious blow on the door, he shouted angrily:

"An ye open not instantly, I must break in the door."

"Beshrew me! Here's a gentle visitor!" was the answer, and then the door yielded to their pressure and the captain, followed by the corporal and three troopers, entered the house.

They paused, however, on the threshold, and Captain Protheroe muttered a despairing exclamation, for the hall was empty save for Mistress Barbara, who, dropping them a mocking curtsey, demanded gravely to what cause she owed the honour of such a visit.

Captain Protheroe quickly recovered his composure and bowed politely, mentally observing that never before had he done full justice to the girl's beauty, or fully realised the fascination that may lurk in soft dark curls trailing over a snowy forehead and nestling into the nape of a beautifully formed neck.

"It grieves me to be thus forced to intrude upon your privacy, Mistress Winslow," he began gently, "but I must obey orders. Methinks you need scarcely pretend ignorance as to the reason of my presence."

"Bless the man!" exclaimed Barbara cheerfully, "does he think his business is writ large on his brow? I assure you, sir, I know nothing whatever of the cause of such a visit."

Captain Protheroe raised his eyebrows.

"In that case, madame, I must inform you. I have certain knowledge that a fugitive has taken refuge in this house, and it is my intention not to leave the place until I have found him."

"A most laudable intention, sir, though I fear me it means that you will remain here for the rest of your natural life. But pray tell me, how long has it been the custom for an honourable gentleman to turn man-hunter?"

The captain reddened angrily.

"It is not a task I would gladly choose, madame, as you might know. But I am not here to discuss the virtue of my orders, I am here to search for this rebel."

"Then in Heaven's name go and search for him elsewhere. I assure you he is not here," exclaimed Barbara petulantly.

Captain Protheroe looked at her for a moment questioningly.

"Will you swear to me that such is the truth, madame?" he asked.

Barbara hesitated for a moment. Then she turned away impatiently and walked back into the room.

"Nay, an my word be not enough, I will swear nothing. Yet I assure you the man you seek is not here."

But even as she spoke the words, she stopped with a stifled cry, for in the centre of the floor lay a man's hat, stained and draggled, but serving, with its long plume and jewelled clasp, as an outspoken traitor to its master.

The captain's glance fell on the hat at the same moment, and he turned to Barbara with a questioning smile. But she had recovered herself in an instant. Walking coolly forward, she concealed the treacherous hat beneath her skirt, until with a dexterous movement she swept it out of sight under the table, while at the same time she unconcernedly (though a trifle breathlessly) repeated her former statement that the man they sought was not in the house.

Captain Protheroe, marvelling greatly at a woman's strangely discriminating sense of honour, which will permit her to assert a fact but not to swear to it, smiled at her statement and bowed politely.

"So be it, madame. Then nought remains save for me to order my men to commence the search at once, since you so resolutely refuse to give up the traitor. I am distressed to disturb you, but search I must."

"Marry! sir, then search," cried Barbara, with a sudden suspiciously hysterical laugh. "Perchance he lurks behind this curtain, or cowers beneath the table. Think you he is concealed in yonder snuff-box, or is hid beneath my petticoats? Prithee, search well, for there is no telling where the rogue may lie," and assuming a mock air of importance closely resembling that of the corporal, she commenced a solemn burlesque of the search, hurrying about the room, and carefully examining the most impossible hiding-places,

while the captain bit his lip to prevent a smile, and the troopers watched her mimicry of their efforts with embarrassed indignation.

When she had concluded her tour of the room, Barbara turned to the astonished soldiers and remarked with mock solemnity:

"You see, I am correct, he cannot be here."

"We are deeply indebted to you for this entertainment, madame," interrupted the captain with grave politeness. "Now we will commence the search in earnest."

The laughter died from Barbara's face, and a strange hunted look crept into her eyes. She glanced round helplessly, as though seeking means of escape, then casting a pleading glance at the captain, she said in a trembling voice:

"If you still persist in your error, you must e'en do as you list," and with a low sigh she turned away and sank wearily into a chair.

Captain Protheroe gave the necessary orders and the corporal and troopers departed on their errand. Then he turned doubtfully towards the girl.

"I am very sorry for this intrusion, Mistress Barbara," he said gently. "My corporal, who is but a blundering fellow, made these dispositions while I was away, otherwise, be assured, I should have taken the fellow before he entered your house."

"Yes, that would have been far easier for you," she answered calmly.

"For you, madame," he corrected her, smiling. "May I hope I am forgiven for thus doing my duty?"

Barbara directed upon him a beaming smile.

"Why, as to that, sir, 'tis I who must crave forgiveness for my inhospitality. I' faith, seeing he is not here, I know not why I should

be so angry at your visit, I should rather pity such a wild-goose chase. Is it not so?"

"*If* he were not here, Mistress Barbara, we should deserve no pity, our intrusion would be quite unpardonable."

"But I have told you that he is not here," she answered eagerly.

"True. And I have told you that he is."

Her lips trembled at his resolute tone, and she turned away her head. But in a moment she answered brightly:

"'Tis clear, sir, this is a most unprofitable subject for discussion, seeing we shall never agree. Time must show who is in the right. In the meantime we will conclude the matter thus: If he be here, the worse for him; if he be not here—why, the worse for you. What say you now?"

"Madame, your argument is unanswerable."

"Then hence with argument, hither with supper. Come, captain, we'll sign a truce for the nonce. If I mistake not, you have had a long ride and spare rations this evening. You are well come. I was about to sup when you interrupted me, so while your men search the house, you shall bear me company. You refuse? Why, what fear you? The house is surrounded, not a creature can escape," she continued bitterly, "and you need not fear lest the wine be drugged or the meat poisoned, for I, too, intend to partake of them."

"Ah, madame, those are not the dangers I fear." He shook his head, with a smile.

"What, then?"

"Look in your mirror, Mistress Barbara, perchance you will understand."

Barbara gave a sudden, laugh of pleased amusement.

"Nay, sir, I protest I have no desire to bewitch you," she answered with a bright blush.

"Then, madame, why do you look at me?" asked the captain, and his eyes said more.

Again the dimple deepened and again the lips curved into a smile. Captain Protheroe detected himself watching for that dimple with a quite inexplicable and, considering his errand, inexcusable eagerness.

"Methinks the conversation is astray upon a bye-path," she answered demurely; "let us return to the high-road. I am dying of hunger, and 'tis but dreary to sup alone. Will you not join me?"

As Captain Protheroe had tasted no food since early morning, the offer was too tempting to be refused.

"Madame, you overwhelm me with kindness," he answered.

She led him to the upper end of the hall, where a table was already laid with three covers.

"Do you always sup in company with two empty chairs, madame?" he asked quizzically.

Barbara flushed crimson and hesitated.

"I—I expected friends, sir," she stammered. Then recovering, she darted a bright glance at him and continued. "And you see my expectations have been fulfilled, for are you not come?"

"Does not another lady dwell here with you?" he queried indifferently.

"Yes—my cousin, Lady Cicely Winslow. But she—she is out," stammered Barbara again nervously.

"Ah! so she is sharing the fellow's hiding-place," muttered the captain to himself. "A piece of folly only possible in a couple of

lovers."

Throughout the meal Barbara laughed and chatted gaily, evidently exerting all her efforts to entertain her guest. She led him on to tell strange stories of his adventures and his travels, to which she listened with that eager interest and open admiration of his doings, so dear to the heart of man; she made him laugh heartily at her quick jests and saucy answers, and ever and anon as she talked she raised her dark lashes, and turned upon him the full depths of her wonderful eyes.

But Captain Protheroe was not altogether unversed in the ways of women, and though he enjoyed to the full the pleasant companionship of her manner, and drank deep of her beauty, he was in no wise mindful to allow her charms to turn his thoughts from the matter in hand.

And as he watched her carefully, he noted how from time to time she would break off abruptly in the middle of a sentence and listen anxiously to some distant sound in the house, while the smile died from her face, and her eyes widened with fear. She twisted her fingers nervously together as she talked, and her laugh was high and shrill.

"She plays her part admirably," he muttered to himself, "but she should not show her eyes."

"'Tis strange how falsely that base churl Rumour reports," he began, when Barbara paused once to listen anxiously to the movements of the searchers overhead. "Now concerning you, madame, methinks he hath totally misspoken."

"Why, what saith Rumour concerning me?" questioned Barbara with interest.

"In the first place," he continued, eyeing her steadily, "he reports that you are fearless both of men, mice, and devils."

"And what then?" she asked, her eyes flashing proudly.

"Why, I say he is a lying fellow, for I see you are as timid as—as a woman."

"I, sir, timid!" she cried indignantly.

"Aye, madame, you start and tremble at every sound."

"Nay—I assure you—I—I do not so," she stammered, trembling with eagerness. "Why, wherefore should I tremble."

"Nay, I know not, madame. Save as the poet saith—'A guilty conscience——'"

"I thank you for the suggestion, sir," she answered with a faint smile. "I will consult my conscience."

There was a pause, the silence broken only by the distant movements of the searchers.

"Is there a ghost in the room, madame," asked Captain Protheroe suddenly.

Barbara started violently.

"A ghost, sir?" she exclaimed.

"Aye, a ghost. I saw you staring at the wall behind me with so horrified an expression, methought you beheld an apparition at least, peeping over my shoulder."

Barbara dropped her head and bit her lip.

"'Twas but my own thoughts. There is nothing else."

Captain Protheroe wheeled round in his chair, and stared thoughtfully at the full-length portrait of an old Winslow knight in armour which confronted him.

"Now what is there in this same old gentleman (for I trust 'twas not my appearance that had such a horrifying effect upon you), what is there here to terrify you?"

"Nothing, sir, I assure you," repeated Barbara faintly.

"Yet there is certainly a strange look about this portrait," he mused. "There is a glint in his eye that mislikes me. One might almost believe," he continued, turning towards her, "that he hid some secret behind that fixed countenance."

Barbara stared at him a moment with terrified face, then she rose abruptly from the table.

"I—I wish you would leave me, sir," she answered curtly.

"That is a hard saying, madame," he exclaimed in mock astonishment. "Did not yourself bid me to supper?"

"Yes. But I am weary of you and now I bid you go."

He laughed quietly.

"That is easily said, madame, but not so easily answered. I may not——"

He was interrupted by a hurried knock at the outer door.

Barbara gave a slight scream and ran across the hall, but Captain Protheroe was at the door before her.

"Pardon me, madame, I must see to this," he said sternly.

He flung the door wide, standing himself in its shadow, and Peter Drew, the smith, rushed quickly into the hall.

"Ah, Mistress Barbara," he exclaimed breathlessly, not noticing her sign to him to be cautious, "the villain hath escaäped me, and I can't faind no traäce of un anywhere."

"Very much my case, my friend," interrupted the captain, shutting the door quickly, and confronting the astonished smith with

a quiet smile. "But what may be the name of this same escaped villain?"

Peter gasped at him stupidly.

"Come, fellow, out with it," cried the captain sharply.

The smith glanced at Barbara and shook his head.

"I don't know," he muttered sulkily.

Captain Protheroe turned to Barbara.

"May I—er—advise you, madame, to order this reluctant henchman of yours to be more speedy in his replies."

"You may tell the captain all you know, Peter," she said after a moment's hesitation. "Methinks 'twill not greatly enlighten him."

"'Tweren't nobbut a certain hawker, your honour. Her ladyship bid me keep un zaäfe till marnin' zo I fastened un oop zafe i' my farge. But when I were awai—er—awai on my biznez thicey marnin' my waife, plague on a meddlezome fingers, zay I, muzt needs oppen door, to zee, forzooth, whai it were zhut, and zo the fellow hath vled."

"Good! Why was this hawker to be thus secured?"

"He had angered me, sir," interrupted Barbara haughtily.

"Ah! summary justice, madame," answered the captain, laughing. "But hardly, methinks, within the measure of the law."

"I care nought for the law."

"So I can well believe. But come, I must know a little more concerning this hawker."

"That you cannot, sir," answered Barbara calmly. "For the simple reason that Peter knows no more, and I, who do know, do not purpose to tell you."

Captain Protheroe hesitated a moment. Then he continued lightly, but eyeing Barbara steadily the while:

"Ah, well! 'Tis of small import. Doubtless it will not be difficult to find the fellow himself and learn all I wish from his own lips."

Barbara's face grew suddenly white.

"Yet another man to search for," she exclaimed lightly, but with a strange hoarseness in her voice. "I' faith, captain, yours is no easy post. It must indeed be a wearisome life to seek and seek for that which like the philosopher's stone, is never to be found."

They were startled by a sudden clamour which arose in a distant part of the building, the clatter of pans and dishes, the angry shouts of the men, and above all the shrill voice of a woman pouring forth a torrent of furious abuse.

"What in the devil's name——" began the captain, striding across the room.

"Oh! 'tis nothing," interrupted Barbara coolly. "Your men have doubtless encountered my waiting-woman, Phoebe. She is somewhat hot and hasty in her humour and—I am sorry for them."

As she spoke the door was flung open and the corporal rushed angrily into the room. He was a miserable sight to behold. His head was saturated with greasy broth which dripped from the ends of his scrubby hair and beard and trickled down his rubicund countenance; he was covered from head to foot with flour and dust, and he held his hand pitiably to his temple where a large bump, the size of an egg, was rapidly rising, to embellish his appearance.

Behind him marched Phoebe, weaponed with a besom, her face blazing with anger, her hair dishevelled, and her sleeves rolled up to her shoulders, showing the brawny arms of this amazon.

At sight of this couple, Barbara fell back into a chair, and laughed till her eyes filled with tears.

"My poor Sir Knight of the Whipcord," she gasped. "What hath befallen thee? Ah me, Phoebe, but thou art a very dragon!"

"A very devil," spluttered the corporal.

"Devil in thy teeth, fellow!" cried the enraged waiting-woman. "Mistress Barbara, what think ye? this fellow hath tramped through every hole and corner of the house; he hath rent the hangings, broken the chiny, forced open the closets, and made the place a very desolation. And then—then he was for trapesing into my kitchen, my kitchen that I had but just redd up, with his great muddy boots, to poke his nose into all my places, because, forsooth, he swears I have a man hid among the pots and pans! A man, indeed! The meddlesome fool! I warrant me 'tis no man, but the victuals that he is in search of."

"Patience, good Phoebe, patience," laughed Barbara. "As thou sayest ever, men are but fools and know no better."

"Humph! Mayhap they knew no better, but they know better now, I warrant. Though it repents me that I wasted the whole of a good basin of broth and a bag of flour i' the teaching of it."

Meanwhile Corporal Crutch, having mopped his brow, and beaten off much of his outer covering of flour, made shift to resume his customary air of pompous dignity.

"This woman, sir," he explained with a wave of the hand in the direction of Phoebe, "withstood us in the doorway of her kitchen, powerfully ammunitioned with pannikins. 'Twas, indeed, a post of some vantage, therefore I deemed it wisdom to lead her off, as you

behold, by a feigned retreat, while the men make a flank attack, and secure the position by entering through the window."

On hearing this Phoebe set up a howl of rage, and disappeared speedily in the direction of the kitchen, to oust the intruders from the spot. The sounds of battle which presently arose proved the success of the corporal's manoeuvre.

Captain Protheroe drew the corporal aside.

"Well! You have searched?"

"Aye, sir, every nook and cranny in the place. Not a rat's hole has escaped us. He must be hid somewhere in this room, for there's no other place unsearched."

"'Tis very like, and I think I can put my finger on the place," answered the captain softly.

Barbara looked up.

"Well, captain, if you are satisfied that I have spoken the truth, perhaps you will take your leave, for I protest I am weary of you."

"One moment, madame," he answered, "I will but examine into the secret of this same cross-eyed ancestor of thine, and then you shall be no further troubled."

He turned, as he spoke, towards the picture, but Barbara sprang to her feet with a sharp cry, and darting past him, placed her back against the frame and turned to him full of defiance.

"Nay, sir, that you shall not," she cried resolutely.

Corporal Crutch paused in his search, and gazed at her in open-mouthed astonishment, but Captain Protheroe strode quickly to her side with a sharp frown.

"Come, madame," he began impatiently, "this is sheer folly. We must proceed with our work. I do, indeed, regret the painful

business, but by your leave we will not prolong it. Be so good as to show me the secret of the spring."

"I will not."

"Then, madame, we must open it by force."

"You shall not pass me," she cried defiantly. "I will not move aside."

Captain Protheroe swore in desperation.

"Come, Mistress Barbara, be reasonable," he urged. "You know well that resistance is quite useless. I were loth to use violence, but an it must be so, methinks it were possible to move you without much injury to either of us."

Suddenly Barbara began to cry, leaning her head back against the frame and sobbing bitterly. But she did not cover her face with her hands as is the manner of most women.

"Oh, go away, I beseech you," she pleaded, clasping her hands in entreaty, and raising tearful eyes to his face. "Rupert hath done you no injury, suffer him to escape this once, and I will be your debtor forever."

Captain Protheroe stared down at her, wondering vaguely whether her eyes looked more lovely when bright with merriment, or when wide and soft with welling tears, and why he had never before noticed how inviting was a full quivering lip. Then suddenly recollecting the unprofitableness of such considerations, he glanced indignantly at the corporal and swore at him beneath his breath.

"You are making my duty very hard for me, madame," he pleaded gently.

"I—I want to," she sobbed. "Please go away."

"No, Mistress Barbara, I cannot," he answered firmly.

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